

## BELIEVE IT OR NOT

The French thinker Auguste Comte [1798-1857] [image] once told Thomas Carlyle that he was going to start a new religion to replace Christianity. "Very good," replied Carlyle. "All you have to do is to be crucified, rise again the third day, and get the world to believe you are still alive. Then your new religion will have a chance." [Focus on the Family Magazine, March 1986, p. 2]. Obviously, Comte's new religion long-term never got off the ground. After death, he never came out of the ground.

All this begs the question of the claims of Christianity. Did a dead man get out of a grave and walk around or didn't He? Is it fact or fiction? Is it a hoax or is it history? Resurrection: Should we **Believe it or Not?** Arnold Toynbee [image] wrote: "You find the body of Jesus and Christianity crumbles into the dust." Produce the body of Jesus and the whole edifice of Christianity collapses. But if Jesus is alive, everything changes: your worldview, your sense of purpose and hope; your capacity for being good and doing good takes a quantum leap forward. If Jesus is alive, if it's the absolute truth, Easter changes everything.

**I. JESUS REALLY DIED.** [BOOK PICTURE] Paul pulls no punches. In I Corinthians 15:3 he writes "Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures." Alternative theories argue otherwise. It's called the swoon hypothesis. "In 1965, Hugh Schonfield published the [controversial book] ...titled The Passover Plot. Schonfield contends that Jesus 'deliberately plotted' his crucifixion and subsequent resurrection" To pull off this amazing scheme somebody would have slipped Jesus a drug that would render him unconscious and only make him appear dead. Like Juliet in Romeo & Juliet, Jesus just looked dead, fell into a death like trance, but wasn't really dead.

Lee Stroebel [image] tells us the swoon hypothesis is "an urban legend that is continually being resuscitated" but should die a very quick death, especially after the showing of Mel Gibson's The Passion of the Christ [Hannegraaff, p. 6 cmp. Stroebel, The Case for Christ, p. 258]. View again that scene from the Movie where Lee Strobel interviews Alexander Metherell. M.D., PH.D. [film] Don't you think it is utterly absurd to imagine that a man flogged as Jesus [flogging picture], his back, lacerated to ribbons by the whip, his body mutilated on the cross [cross], his heart and the sack of fluid surrounding the heart [pericardium] pierced through by the soldier's lance, it is absurd to think that Jesus was anything but dead. But for the sake of argument assume he didn't die [tomb]. Explain to me how Jesus in such a weakened state could roll the one to two-ton massive stone away up an incline away from the tomb's entrance? How could he then escape out of the tomb with his grave clothes undetectably undisturbed? And then how could he appear repeatedly to his disciples perfectly healthy? Doesn't it sound utterly absurd to believe that Jesus appeared to his disciples in Jerusalem, then in Galilee for 40 days afterwards perfectly healthy? Let there be no doubt. Jesus really died.

**II. THE TOMB WAS EMPTY!** We read in Luke the historian's record [Luke 24:2-3] that some women took spices to the tomb to anoint Jesus' body. When they got there, "They found the stone rolled away from the tomb, but when they entered, they did not find the body of the Lord Jesus." Did you ever wonder why the stone was rolled away? It certainly wasn't so Jesus could get out, for in his resurrection state stone walls were no barrier to him. The stone was rolled away so the disciples would walk in and examine the evidence, the twin evidence of the **empty tomb and**

**the undisturbed grave clothes.** Let me deal with the last first. We're told in John 20:6-8 that after the women came to the tomb, John and Peter raced to the tomb. John beat Peter to the tomb, but Peter entered the tomb first. The text says, "He saw the strips of linen lying there, as well as the burial cloth that had been around Jesus' head. The cloth was folded up by itself, separate from the linen. Finally, the other disciples, who had reached the tomb first, also went inside. He saw and believed." What moved John in faith there in that empty tomb? Think about it. If grave robbers had come to steal Jesus' body would they have taken the time to un-wrap the grave clothes and then go through the hassle of carrying around a stiff, naked corpse? Nor would grave robbers have taken the time, Chrysostom says, "to remove the soudarion [=headpiece] and put it in place by itself" [R. Brown, p. 1007]. One scholar argued that the bindings [othonia] wrapped around Jesus and impregnated with aromatic oil [19:40] "had remained stiffly erect after the body had passed through them, almost as if somehow one were to slide a corpse out of its mummy wrappings and have the wrappings preserve the form" [Ibid, p. 1008]. The neatly wrapped headpiece, the undisturbed grave clothes, the empty tomb itself led Jesus' best friend, John, to real faith in the resurrection.

It does no good to suggest that, of course the tomb was empty. **The women went to the wrong tomb!** Balderdash! Mark clearly states that the...

**1. "The sun had risen!" [Mark 16:2].**

**2. These women were no fools.** One woman might be misled and take the wrong path, but it is the height of folly to believe that about the host of women Luke 24:10 speaks of ["Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the others with them"] Isn't it a little patriarchal snobbery to believe that having gone to the right tomb late afternoon Friday all these females could have mistakenly gone to the wrong tomb on Sunday morning. And even if by some stretch of the imagination the women were confused certainly not

**3. Peter, John, Nicodemus and above all Joseph of Arimathea, the owner of the tomb** would not have ended up in the wrong place. If you own expensive real estate like a garden tomb, you usually know how to find it.

Or does it make sense to suggest that the **disciples or thieves stole Jesus' body?** The Romans had posted guards at the tomb. Some experts believe there would have been 4 up to a 16-man security unit guarding the tomb. There is little chance that any of them would have fallen asleep. For if just one guard had fallen asleep, his clothes would have been stripped off and burned alive by a fire started with his own garments. Imagine having that kind of penalty for sleeping in church? [Is everyone awake now?!]. It is utter nonsense to think the women went to the wrong tomb, that Jesus swooned, or that the disciples stole Jesus' body. It wasn't there in the grave. Don't suppress the evidence! Jesus of Nazareth came out of the grave alive! The grave clothes were undisturbed the tomb was empty.

**III. JESUS APPEARED MULTIPLE TIMES AFTER HIS RESURRECTION.** The evidence for Jesus' resurrection is not based on rumor, but on the validity of numerous eyewitness accounts. Many people actually saw Jesus alive! Luke tells us in Acts 1:3 "After his suffering, [Jesus] he showed himself to these men and gave **many** convincing proofs that he was alive. He appeared to them over a period of forty days and spoke about the kingdom of God." In Luke 24 we're told Jesus appeared to two

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emotionally beat up disciples taking the 7-mile trek from Jerusalem to Emmaus [picture] and made himself known to them when he tore bread apart. That same Easter Sunday Jesus appeared to his disciples in the upper room, invited them to grab hold of him, touch and see if he wasn't real. He then asked if they had anything to eat. They offered him "a piece of broiled fish and he ate it in their presence" [Luke 24:43]. John speaks of an encounter later by the Sea of Galilee where Jesus fixed for himself and the disciples a breakfast of grilled bread and fish. Some argue that the disciples were hallucinating. How 'bout it? Have you ever eaten fish with a figment of your imagination; ever had breakfast with a warm fuzzy?

Listen to the words Paul affirms in I Corinthians 15:5-8. Take out your magnifying glasses. Put this text under the microscope. These are extremely ancient words, included in this letter dated AD 54, but circulated as a creedal form to be dated within three to eight years of Christ's crucifixion [Hannegraaff, p. 38, Habermas, The Historical Jesus, p. 154, J. Jeremias, New Testament Theology, p. 306]. This stuff is very ancient! This is the furthest thing from the old-time parlor game of Telephone or Whisper Down the Alley. Most of these eyewitnesses Paul speaks of were alive in AD 54 to confirm or deny any of the details. Paul takes a creed to his lips: "For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Peter, and then to the Twelve. After that he appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers at the same time, most of whom are still living, though some have fallen asleep. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles, and last of all he appeared to me also, as to one abnormally born." [Diagram: Jesus' Post Resurrection Appearances] Wrap your brain around this massive amount of eyewitness evidence. Lee Stroebel argues: "If you were to call each one of the witnesses to a court of law to be cross-examined for just fifteen minutes each, and you went around the clock without a break, it would take you from breakfast on Monday until dinner on Friday to hear them all. After listening to 129 straight hours of eyewitness testimony, who could possibly walk away unconvinced?" [The Case for Christ, p. 320]. Witness after witness made the same audacious claim: "We have seen the Lord!"

**IV. THE LOGIC OF UNBELIEF.** In the fourth place Paul goes on to map out of the logic of unbelief, the inevitable consequences of denying the resurrection of Christ from the dead. Look at vs. 14 "*If Christ has not been raised [what then]?*" American humorist H. Allen Smith once suggested that of all the worrisome words in the English language, the scariest is, "uh oh," as when a physician looks at your X-rays, and with knitted brow and grimace says, "Uh oh." Paul is throwing up on the X-ray a hypothetical scenario. What if Christ had not been raised, what then?

**The Message of Salvation is make believe.** Paul writes: "*If Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith. Then [vs. 17] your faith is futile; and you are still in your sins.*" If Christ hasn't been raised then we are cosmic dead meat. We are still lost in our sins. If Christ is still dead, it's an uh, oh of the most catastrophic kind. We are still guilty and condemned. Our salvation is one big make believe.

**Life Is A Cruel Joke** And get this too, Paul says in vs. 18, "*If Christ has not been raised, 'Then those who have fallen asleep in Christ are lost.....Then we are to be pitied more than all men.'*" Then life is a cruel and miserable joke. He says that hedonism

would be the only sensible philosophy, "*If the dead are not raised, let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die*" [15:32b]. If it all ends six feet under with the maggots, pushing daisies, why bother? If Christ is still dead, then given a few brief hours I'm going to be dead; then we might as well be drowning in booze, snorting cocaine, or living for the experience of unrestrained sexual pleasure. Why not amuse yourself to death? When the Titanic sinks, the party's over.

**The Dangerous Mission of the Church is Ridiculous.** Paul takes the logical outcome of a dead Christ even further. Look at vv. 30-32a. He asks, "*Why do we endanger ourselves every hour? ...I die every day!*" Paul goes on, "*If I fought wild beasts in Ephesus [i.e., enemies as ferocious as wild beasts]*" for merely human reasons, what have I gained? If the dead are not raised." The great French mathematician Pascal [image] wrote, "*I [believe] those witnesses that get their throats cut*" [Keller, 210]. For every effect there has to be an adequate cause. What was it that transformed that little company of defeated cowards into a band of gutsy missionaries willing to be crucified upside down like Peter, boiled in a cauldron of oil like John or beheaded like Paul? Would you risk your life for what you knew was a lie? The dangerous mission of the church would be absolutely idiotic, were Christ not raised from the dead.

"One of the most famous atheists in the last century was Bertrand Russell [image]. When he was ninety years old, he had a famous encounter with a woman at a party. The woman said to him, 'Mr. Russell, you are not only the world's most famous atheist; you are maybe the world's oldest atheist. You will die soon. What will you do if, after you die, it turns out that God exists? What will you do if you come face-to-face with this God whom you've defied your whole life long?' Bertrand Russell responded to her that he would point his finger at God [always a very unwise thing to do] and say, 'You, sir, gave us insufficient evidence.' [J. Ortberg, Faith and Doubt, p. 105]. I wonder how God might respond to Bertrand Russell's challenge. God might say, "Bertrand, how much evidence would have been enough?" How much more would you need? The massive historical evidence for the resurrection of my Son, Jesus is the 800 lb gorilla in the living room. How do you sweep an 800 lb gorilla under the rug?

When it comes to the historicity of Jesus and His resurrection there are two chairs that you can choose to put your backside into. Think of it. To put your bank your life on the chair of unbelief (atheism) or the chair of faith. On one chair you defiantly say "No" to Jesus. With the other chair you utter a full-throated, radical "Yes" to Jesus. I backed up my theological dump truck and released a boatload of evidence. If you choose to sit in the chair of unbelief you've got to sweep all that evidence under the historical rug; you've got to establish a plausible historical argument and assume that it's all just a hoax. To assume that it's impossible for dead men to come out of their grave alive; that's a faith assumption itself. Indeed, it is an irrational leap of faith. But to surrender to the evidence and say to God as Lee Stroebel did, O.K. God. You win! I believe in You. Your faith will have found a resting place. And you'll sing, "On Christ, the solid rock I stand; all other ground is sinking sand. All other ground is sinking sand."

I Corinthians 15:1-19; 29-34

The Case for Christ IV: Racine CRC

September 30, 2018

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